

Looking Ahead It's Cargo, not Just Cars, We Need to Worry About

*By U.S. Congressman Kevin Brady
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As you drive home from work today notice the number of massive 18-wheelers ahead of you, beside you, and approaching you.

Now double that number. Imagine how congested and intimidating it will be to drive, especially with your family in the car, with twice as many tractor trailers on the road. That is what transportation experts predict will occur in the next 12 years, when an expected 6.6 billion tons of new freight will move over our highways.

As Texans debate toll roads and the controversial Trans-Texas Corridor, we need to keep in mind our challenge for the future is not simply cars – it is cargo.

Like Texas, America's economy is growing and with it the demand for transporting freight. Even with only moderate economic growth, transportation experts predict U.S. freight tonnage will increase 80 percent by 2020. Import-export tonnage – that is, American products going overseas and goods coming in from our ports and borders – will nearly double, which will impact Texas greatly. If the past is any predictor, most of that increase will move over America's roads, a few feet away from our cars and trucks.

Clearly, we must significantly expand our highway capacity. Even then, I'm not convinced our road infrastructure can handle it all. We will still face congestion, safety, and environmental challenges. We must look at new solutions that can help alleviate the strain on our roads and the pollution in our air.

An important part of the answer, I believe, is back to the future. Back to the freight rail system that was a triumph of 19th century America, faced bankruptcy in the 20th century, then rebounded through deregulation and today is running at near capacity.

This is a system that can take 280 trucks off the road with just one rail train. A train can haul a ton of freight 423 miles on just one gallon of diesel, which reduces greenhouse gases by two-thirds and saves fuel costs. The more goods going by rail, the less goods that are moving on our highways and clogging up traffic. That will save commuters significant time and frustration while increasing safety.

That's important for fast-growing Texas since we have one of the largest economies in the nation. We are also the largest exporting state in America. No one sells or ships more overseas than we do. Our ports and commercial border crossings are already crowded. Looking ahead to relieve that congestion is smart thinking.

America's railroads are already investing in their own infrastructure at record levels - five to six times greater than the average U.S. manufacturer. But that amount is not enough to meet demand today and certainly not for the future. Both short and long-haul railroads must expand significantly, and are struggling to do so.

I have seen this first-hand when working with community economic development groups seeking to attract new business and jobs to Texas but discovering there is no room on the rail system. Railroads are reluctant to accept new customers for fear it will lower service to existing ones.

We need a 21st century solution. With the right amount of private and public investment – about \$5 billion a year over the next three decades – we can meet rising demand and prevent billions of tons of new freight from overwhelming our highways.

This increased investment is needed to lay down double tracks on existing rights-of-way; build bridges, side rails and new spurs to serve business; improve warning systems and at-grade crossings; and add more railcars, intelligent signaling and tracking technology. We also need to unblock current choke points across America, construct intermodal connectors and improve rail interchanges within our cities.

These improvements will save shippers money, save highway users billions of dollars, save taxpayers highway maintenance costs, and create thousands of jobs nationwide.

That's why in Congress I helped introduce the bi-partisan *Freight Rail Infrastructure Capacity Expansion Act of 2007* to encourage new private investment in our railways. The bill would attract new dollars by providing an incentive – a 25 percent tax credit – to companies that invest in rail infrastructure. Not only would railroads be eligible for the credit, but companies and private port entities seeking to access or improve service to their front door would as well.

Expanding our nation's rail capacity is critical if our economy is going to grow and remain competitive. Additional rail provides our manufacturers, farmers and

ranchers with an efficient means to get their products to customers quickly and dependably – whether that is around the country or around the world.

As Texas and American leaders discuss ways to reduce congestion and improve our environment, let's look at freight transportation as an integrated system - with roads, skies, rail and barge all as critical parts.

No doubt, freight rail can play an important role in a 21st century solution.

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